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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004605

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TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: WOMEN,S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS GRADE COUNCIL OF  
REPRESENTATIVES, MINISTRIES, PERFORMANCE

Classified By: Deputy PolCouns Bob Gilchrist for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: A group of prominent women's rights activists gathered in early December to critique the government institutions that most affect their work. Speaking on issues beyond just women's rights, the group expressed the view that none of the three bodies that most influence their activities had yet reached a level of performance such that they could be described as effective and responsive institutions. The group gave the highest score (C-) to the Council of Representatives (CoR) as, in the activists' view, it had begun to function as a parliament but was distant from average Iraqis and failed to move forward aggressively on divisive issues. The Civil Society Ministry, from the group's perspective, scored the worst - an "F" - for overtly supporting the efforts of sectarian organizations while impeding the work of many secular ones. The Ministry of State for Women,s Affairs fared only slightly better, with the women finally compromising on "incomplete" as they asserted there were "too few activities thus far to actually assess the ministry." Despite their expressed frustration, the group underscored a commitment to trying to help strengthen these institutions. All noted that the government still lacked a fundamental understanding of the role of civil society in a democracy. End Summary.

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Council of Representatives: Functioning, but Removed from  
Citizens  
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12. (C) The meeting was called by Al Amal NGO director Hanaa Edwar, and included Besma Al-Khateeb, Youth Programs Director for Al Amal (previously of UNIFEM); Salma Jabbo, gender advisor to President Talabani; and Liza Nisan Hido of the Baghdad Women,s Association NGO. They began with a discussion of the performance of the Council of Representatives (CoR). They agreed that it was good to see democratic institutions finally starting to function properly, but lamented the decision by CoR leaders to address divisive issues before trust had been built. The women agreed that as recently as last month, the parliament may have scored a "C," however the relative inactivity of the Constitutional Review Committee forced them to give the CoR a "C-." "That score will probably drop lower, but we are hoping for the best from constitutional review" Edwar predicted.

13. (C) Al-Khateeb asserted that, while it may represent the majority of political parties, the CoR won,t have legitimacy as long as CoR members continue to appear more committed to the parties than to the concerns of average Iraqis. Edwar agreed, citing the vote on the regions formation law as an

example. "It was a mockery of democracy," she claimed, "with 140 random individuals deciding how 26 million will live." Poloff reminded the women that CoR members were elected to represent those 26 million people. Edwar reluctantly agreed, but expressed the view that members should be focused on transitional programs and development of the government institutions and infrastructure of Iraq before deciding on contentious issues.

14. (C) On the issue of constitutional review, the women asserted that the constitution was only passed because of the promise that there would be an opportunity for all parties to review and revise the document. "The Kurds and Shia already got what they wanted, so what is their motivation to take the review seriously?" Jabbo worried. Al-Khateeb agreed, adding that even if the committee was able to agree on substantive changes, she doubted that the whole package would pass in the national referendum. Hido lamented the committee's apparent lack of attention to Article 41, the article defining personal status, expressing that "we shouldn't be surprised, considering that the committee is fully partisan and nearly devoid of women." All of the women agreed that the current committee should vote to postpone their work for at least a year so that the political parties could learn to work better together, and so that trust could be built between the people and their representatives. "Public understanding of democracy needs to catch up with the pace of democracy," Edwar noted.

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Civil Society Ministry - "More Harm than Benefit"  
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15. (C) The women agreed that the Ministry of State for Civil  
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Society Affairs caused, in their words, "far more harm than benefit" to NGOs. They expressed concern that the Minister abused his position to support organizations funded by conservative Shia Islamic parties, while harassing independent, secular oriented organizations. Although Edwar noted that Al Amal had not had problems with the ministry directly, she said that many of her counterparts at NGOs that were smaller and less established had had their assets frozen and had been subjected to repeated visits from ministry "staff" based on their women's rights agenda and activities. "Why do we even need such a ministry?" Al-Khateeb questioned, noting that the institution was against international standards.

16. (C) Hido conceded that there were some legitimate reasons for the registration process, but asserted that the ministry collected too much personal information, such as full names and addresses of staff members. She also said that ministry officials asked staff whether they were Sunni or Shia during meetings. (NOTE: None of this information is officially requested in the registration packet, however we have received reports of such behavior from time to time. For example, in late October, Ibteesam Al Shammary of the Patience Humanitarian Organization also told Poloff that the minister's secretary asked questions about her staff and her religion before her first meeting with him. END NOTE) They agreed that the system functioned much more smoothly and securely when NGO registration had been processed by the Ministry of Planning. "It just makes sense, from a strategic development perspective, for the MOP to run the office," Al-Khateeb argued, noting that the ministry was generally regarded as "technical" and "non-partisan."

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Women's Affairs Ministry Scores "INCOMPLETE"  
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17. (C) The women expressed strong concerns about sectarian rumors that have plagued current Minister of Women's Affairs Fatin Abd al-Rahman. Hido said that a contact of hers who

had been in the public relations section at the ministry had recently been fired for apparently no reason. "She,s not alone, we have all heard about the minister,s attempts to eliminate the Shia from her staff," she claimed. They also expressed the belief that the minister did not seem interested in working with NGOs, although all of them had reached out to her and had offered their support.

18. (C) Hido wondered what the minister's program for the future of her ministry was. She noted that, apart from "poorly executed conferences," she had seen little from the ministry. She asked the group if anyone could name one project that this minister had implemented. Al-Khateeb asserted that the lack of initiative and direction was particularly disappointing since UNIFEM had been conducting training with the MOWA staff for the past three years. Poloff asked what the group thought would help to make the minister more effective, and the women agreed that a competent advisor with real experience in women,s issues could help.

19. (C) Ultimately the women decided that they had not seen enough work or activity from the ministry to accurately assess its performance. Poloff noted that the minister and her staff were currently in US meeting officials and receiving basic training. They expressed cautious optimism that the trip would give the minister fresh perspective, new ideas and enthusiasm for her job. They similarly underscored their commitment to do what they could to help build the ministry, as well as the other institutions key to their work.

110. (C) Comment: The negative views of these activists -- who remain among the most effective and visible voices on women's issues in Iraq -- reflect an increasing frustration expressed by many NGOs that the Maliki government and the CoR have not typically incorporated the views of civil society in key legislative or policy decisions. Moreover, many complain that few political leaders, with the exception of Human Rights Minister Wijdan Salim, understand the fundamental role of civil society in a democracy. The views expressed by this group also reflect a growing impatience by many Iraqis with the seeming inability of many government institutions to address key security concerns or adequately provide basic services. All four of women emphasized the importance of continuing to try to strengthen Iraqi's nascent democratic institutions. Nonetheless, none of them expressed optimism they would see measurable change in the near to mid-term.  
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